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SUMMONED TO LIFE

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FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1-10. Mark 1:12-20

"And Jesus said. . .'Follow me'. . ."
– Mark 1:17 (NRSV)

In her bestseller, *Dakota, A Spiritual Geography*, Kathleen Norris describes her own religious experience in a way that sounded familiar. She was brought up in her family's church tradition, but as a bright adolescent decided that religion wasn't for her. She writes:

> "Growing up and discovering who I was meant not going near a church for twenty years. Trust in the religious sphere has been hard to come by. Like many Americans of my Baby Boomer generation, I had thought that religion was a constraint to be overcome by dint of reason, learning, artistic creativity, sexual liberation. Church was for little kids and grandmas, a small town phenomenon that one grew out of or left behind."

When, later, she tentatively returned to church, she found that

> "The services felt like a bombardment. Doctrinal language slammed many a door in my face, and I became frustrated when I couldn't glimpse the Word behind the words. Ironically it was the language about Jesus Christ, meant to be most inviting, that made me feel most left out." [p. 94-97]

Norris' experience – dropping out of church for two decades and then tentatively inquiring about the meaning of faith – is reflected in a whole generation or two of us. Prominent sociologist Wade Clark Roof is an expert on the Baby Boomers who he calls a *Generation of Seekers*, the title of his recent book. I think he's describing much more than people in their forties. Listen to this observation, for instance.

> "With so much stress on such values as freedom, success and self-fulfillment, critics argue that our capacity for commitment to others suffers. Many fear that belonging and loyalty to religious institutions are underminded, as is our capacity for commitment to other people. . .we are seekers – not joiners. . ." [p. 27]

Everybody agrees, on the one hand, that we are a secular society - and becoming more so. Organized religion seems to be in decline. Mainline churches are shrinking in number and in influence. There was a time not long ago when we were newsworthy; the religion page was lively, read by everyone and even included reviews of sermons from major pulpits. Today the religion page is near the back, next to the obituaries. And yet, we seem to be asking religious questions, expressing our spirituality – in spite of secularism.

It's impossible to read the entertainment section of the paper and avoid religion.

People are standing in line this week to see "Shadowlands," which is about the life and love of C. S. Lewis who not only wrote wonderful children's books, but was a thoroughly orthodox Christian.

And Jesus – books about him continue to be written and read. Three new books about Jesus were reviewed in *Time Magazine* two weeks ago, sharply and critically. There is a sense in which our age is particularly fascinated with him, with this man who so dramatically lived a life which seems both to affirm and judge our own lives. I was intrigued therefore with Kathleen Norris' statement that when she was in the process of reentering the church, it was precisely language about Jesus Christ – meant to be inviting and which made her feel left out.

In fact, every age has been intrigued by him. . .

Yale scholar, Jarslav Pelikan, points out that the art of every era has reflected differently on the person of sus: in the Greek era he was a mighty warrior doing battle with Satan. After Constantine he became King Jesus reigning from a golden throne: in the Middle Ages, a celibate, humble monastic.

In the American slave era, captive Africans sat in the balconies of white churches and heard about Jesus. And when they were no longer allowed in, formed their own church with its own art and music which embraced a man who was despised and rejected, a "sweet little Jesus boy" with nowhere to lay his head, a strong but humble victim of crucifixion. When the spiritual asks "were you there when they crucified my Lord?" African slaves knew what it meant to be there.

In the early part of the 20th century, known for the Social Gospel, Jesus was a progressive, a social activist. In the 60s he was a counter culture figure as in "Jesus Christ Superstar." And today, in the poor barrios of Central America and southern Mexico, he is Jesus Christ, liberator of the oppressed.

He is "a man for others," all others, in all times and places.

Other religions respect and revere him. And all the while there has always been the sense that how we define him and relate to him is a matter of personal significance: that somehow how we define and relate to him will be replete in how we define ourselves and relate to others.

And so, a series of sermons between now and Easter, based on incidents in his life and ministry, as they are described in the Gospel According to Mark. Along the way we will attempt to identify what we can know about him. We will learn perhaps more about academic inquiry into what the scholars know as the historical Jesus than we really want to know. The problem that occurs as we focus on him, in order to learn and understand him, is that we are deprived of many of the resources we are accustomed to using when we do history. No one took a picture of him. CNN doesn't have a video file on his life. During the three years of his public ministry no one thought to take notes and write down what he did or said. He himself left behind no writings. Scholars debate whether or not he was literate. Some say he learned to read at Synagogue School; others say that if he was a carpenter's son and truly a peasant, no Jewish peasants could read.

The fact is, no one knows. The fact is we know precious little. Nothing, for instance, between his birth and a single incident when he was 12. Nothing for the next 18 years. It wasn't until perhaps thirty years after his lifetime that someone collected the stories about him, the teachings, the sayings that were remembered and repeated and passed on, and organized it into a document. The earliest one we know about is called Gospel According to Mark. Over the next forty or fifty years it was followed by more of them – some of them in the Bible, the Gospel of Matthew, Luke and John. Some are not in the Bible – the Gospel According to Thomas, for instance. And some no doubt are lost. It won't get you into heaven but it is interesting to know that the scholars who bring to the study of Biblical materials all the tools of research, examination, critical analysis that they use to study Native American archeology, for instance, long ago concluded that there was a very important document, now lost, made up of the sayings of Jesus. When you compare the Gospels it appears that Matthew wrote with a copy of Mark in front of him. Luke had access to Matthew. And, the scholars assure us that Matthew and Luke had access to another document – known to the scholars as simply Q – from the later Quelle–Source. There are distinguished and brilliant Biblical scholars who spend their careers, reconstructing Q and hoping that some day it turns up on the back shelf on some as yet uncovered 2nd Century monastery in the Sinai Desert.

Now – this kind of talk, and the fact that there are serious scholars looking at the life of Jesus like this, is profoundly disturbing to some people who believe that God dictated every word in the Bible and if there are mysterious omissions or outright contradictions, the fault is ours. Scripture is to be revered and obeyed, not subjected to objective analysis. And some of us have always held that study can enhance faith, that Jesus can hold his own in the classroom.

In a review two weeks ago, *Time Magazine* took a critical posture about several new books about Jesus that are causing quite a stir. One of them is written by a neighbor of ours, Professor John Dominic Crossan who teaches at DePaul. Crossan's new book is *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*. It challenges and disturbs as all good scholarship always does. It is very much in the spirit of an older and important work by Albert Schweitzer, the last paragraph of which is now legendary and which appears on the front of the bulletin. What

Schweitzer finally says about Jesus, after an exhaustingly scholarly analysis, is that the point is not entirely to understand him. In fact, that may not be possible, ultimately. Schweitzer says the point is to follow him and in the following you will start to know who he is.

Crossan echoes that idea in the prologue to his book, in an imaginary conversation between Jesus and the author.

Jesus says:

> "I've read your book, Dominic, and it is quite good. So now you're ready to live by my vision and join me in my program?"
>
> "I don't think I have the courage, Jesus, but I did describe it quite well, didn't I, and the method was especially good, wasn't it?"
>
> "Thank you, Dominic, for not falsifying the message to suit your own incapacity. That at least is something."
>
> "Is it enough, Jesus?"
>
> "No, Dominic, it is not."

So – study and examine and analyze and compare and argue and debate and come to some conclusion about who he was and what he was like, but even the best of the scholars know that the most important matter of all – is – our relationship: his call and our response.

The way Mark tells the story, Jesus of Nazareth one day appears on the banks of the Jordan River, listens to a man preaching about the coming Kingdom of God, decides to be part of that kingdom, walks into the water to be baptized by the preacher, whose name is John, as a symbol of his new commitment. And while all that is happening, he has a kind of vision which tells him that he is God's Son, the Beloved, that God is pleased with him. The way Mark tells it Jesus then leaves whatever he was doing in Nazareth, probably living in his family's home, caring for his mother and brothers and sisters, working as a carpenter, making what carpenters made - yokes for oxen, farm implements, wooden bowls, spoons, rough tables. "You're guessing" the scholars would say: "You don't know, you can't know it." Whatever he was doing in Nazareth he walked away from it. . .began something new. He committed himself to the coming Kingdom of God, and after a period of testing and reflection in the desert, he emerged in Galilee, preaching a message similar in some ways to John's – "The Kingdom is near. Repent. Believe the good news."

And then, the way Mark tells it, he recruited some people to follow him, to travel with him. The brief account is brilliant; there are sharp details – the Sea of Galilee, the fishing boats, the nets, the names of the men and those unforgettable words: "Follow me. . .and they left their nets and followed."

It's not so much an invitation as it is a command. The initiative seems to be all his. Simon and Andrew, James and John, drop their nets and follow. We wish for more, of course. We'd like a little explanation. We'd like to know that Simon and Andrew were sick of fishing, were having a vocational crisis, and were ready for an adventure. We'd like to know that the Zebedees were a dysfunctional family: that James hated his father and John was emotionally codependent on the old man, and that he – Zebedee – that day his boys finally left and said, "Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last!" We can't know that sort of thing. What we can know from this brief but powerful account is that when it comes to Jesus you and I go about it very differently. We want to know who he is first of all. Before we commit anything, before we even join a church, we want to have a working theological understanding of who he was: what Son of God means; what he wants; what he's about. But Mark, the earliest, deliberately it seems, wants us to think in a new way about this religion business; wants us, apparently, to forget what we think we know about religion – religious institutions, religious rules and regulations, even religious ideology - and simply get up from what we are doing and start to follow him. Mark wants us, apparently, not to entertain and then agree to some propositions about a man who lived 2,000 years ago – but to hear a summons to a new life, a summons from God through this Jesus, to give ourselves to

something, to take some risks, to care passionately and bravely enough to do something very uncharacteristic and unlikely; to hear a summons from God – to be alive and not dead.

Is that not part of why we find this man so intriguing, so compelling? Is that not why people who are not particularly religious in the traditional sense find this Jesus fascinating and disturbing – because he commands us to let go of the inert weight of habit and custom and status quo and follow him and in the process to discover what it means to be alive – to be me?

Okay, okay, so he wants me to follow – he wants me, not my intellectual agreement to ideas about him: he wants me to believe good news about God's Kingdom, not with my intellect, but my life. He wants me to start to live and act and be as if God's Kingdom really was at hand. But I never heard that voice. God never called my name. I know people who say it happened to them: can tell me the day, hour – moment – people who were struck by lightning – called by name – I wish I could say that – but I can't.

On the cover of a journal I read there is a picture of the Almighty, in the style of the Sistine Chapel, pointing to a woman who is sitting, obviously waiting for something. In God's hand is a telephone and the caption says,

"God calling – anybody home?"

The simple fact is that most of us aren't sure we've heard God call. We are sure we've never had a vision, or been stuck by lightening, or heard a voice in the middle of the night, so how in the world are you and I go get up and follow Jesus if we haven't heard his voice?

My suggestion, modestly, but honestly made, is that we have heard the call of Christ, but for one reason or another, we didn't recognize it, or didn't want to hear it, or wanted to hear it but couldn't quite make it out because there was so much other noise to listen to and decipher. My proposal, rooted actually in that wonderful old story of Samuel and his parents and the old priest Eli and the voice that comes to him in the middle of the night, is that if you want to hear God's call to you, you have to do what Eli told Samuel to do, essentially which was "shut up and listen: stop talking, stop running around in the middle of the night asking questions – and listen." And understand this: God's voice sounds like Eli's voice. God chooses human voices to address us: the call of Christ comes disguised in the voices of people.

I love something Frederick Buechner once wrote about it.

> "The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

So listen to the gladness of your own heart. Listen to what makes you rejoice, what makes your heart sing and your spirit soar. And listen to voices that call you, the voices of people who need you, who depend on you, who look to you for strength and courage and life.

It may or may not be a matter of your profession. Your call may not mean changing jobs or moving from one place to another. The call of Jesus Christ to each of us, I believe, is even more elemental than that; it is to get up and follow – whatever you are doing; get up and start to walk behind him, to do what we perceive he wants us to do; to love and care and forgive and start to give life away to people and institutions and causes that matter, that make a difference, that correspond perhaps in some way to the Kingdom he said was at hand. What he invites us to – commands us to – is to risk loving and caring.

The motion picture, "Shadowlands" is about the remarkable personal story of C. S. Lewis, scholar, author, professor of English Literature at Oxford, confirmed bachelor. Lewis's life was unalterably changed by an American woman, Joy Gresham, who was a literary admirer, then a good friend and with whom he fell deeply in love. Lewis had made a reputation in the 1930s as a lecturer on religion and often spoke about the enigma of suffering and its relationship to the will of God. When Joy became critically ill, the academic problem of undeserved human suffering became terribly personal and real. As he watched someone he cared about suffer – and began himself to suffer, he realized that the suffering was a result of his caring. Lewis learned that it was

his love for her and her love for him that taught him how to be alive: taught him that real life suddenly begins to happen when he committed himself – intellectually, emotionally physically, spiritually, financially to another human being: taught him the difference between contentment which comes from stability and routine, ıd deeply passionate happiness which comes when you give yourself absolutely in love. It was his beloved who taught him that the pain which will come later is part of the joy we are given to experience now: that it is part of the bargain, that you can't have one without the other: no life without commitment.

The movie is deeply affecting. When it ends people sit and pretend to read the credits but they are really thinking and wiping tears – because we do know that life is lived in the giving away: that real life is lived when we answer some summons, some call, some command.

"Follow me," he says. Get up from what you are doing – today: decide: choose: stumble along behind. I will make you something you are not yet. I will show you what it means to be alive.

Amen.

* * * * *

O, dear God, the call of Jesus, your Son, has come to us in so many ways. Help us to hear his voice in the voices of others, to see his face in the faces of people who need us. Give us the courage to follow where he leads; to give our lives to him, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.